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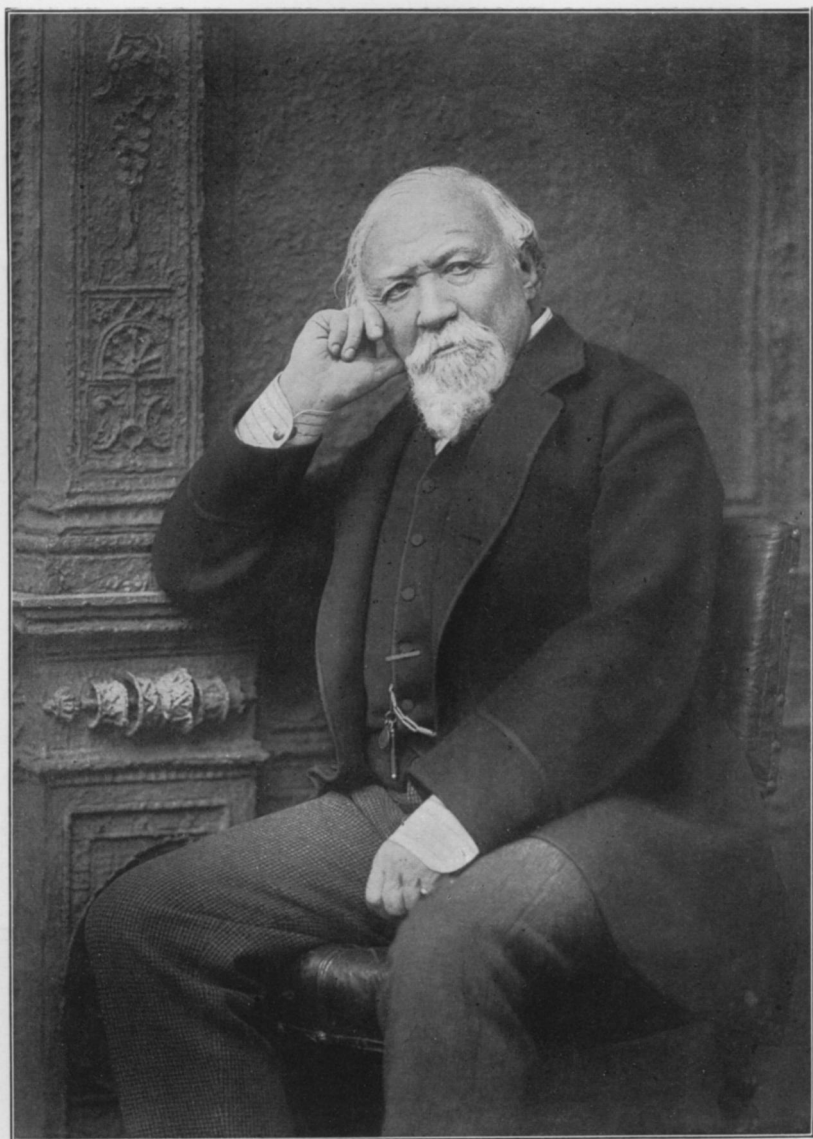
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*Robert Browning*

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ROBERT BROWNING

(1812-1912)

BY DARRELL FIGGIS

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THE seeming inevitableness with which contemporary criticism has gone astray in its judgments on poets and their poetry is, from one point of view, one of the humors of English literature. Looking over the calm, imperturbable way in which poetry has gone forward, its splendid passage through the years, unmindful of any, unmindful chiefly of the clamorous critics who have stood at byways like showmen, loudly voicing the claims of their byway to be poesy's highway, and hurrying up the highway in the end with more speed than dignity, is, in the main, more a happy than an unhappy spectacle. It is, at any rate, a salutary spectacle, though from the nature of the case it is difficult to see how it can be other than so to the end of days, seeing it is the special business of the poet to bring something that shall increase the vision of men, to which, therefore, the vision of men shall need time to adjust itself. And it is a spectacle that stretches back farther than we are inclined sometimes to think. For example, we imagine Shakespeare as overtopping handsomely the age which he with his sovereign shares in naming; and we trick his contemporaries out in our thought. It is our thought, however, not theirs. It was not for his greatness Shakespeare was praised by his

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own age, not for the amazing and mingled omniscience and exaltation of him, but for his sugary sweetness, his fertility of invention, if not, indeed, his graciousness of person. A careful reading of the literature of the time makes it tolerably clear that to the men of their day it was Ben Jonson and not Shakespeare that overtopped his time. The echo of this can be heard quite clearly in Milton. So, too, when Blake sang, it was Crabbe and not he whom the critics crowned. Not Wordsworth, but Thomas Campbell and Walter Scott, won their plaudit. With that plaudit in his ear Campbell jested on Shelley, who was rejected as a "pestiferous mixture of blasphemy, sedition, and sensuality" by those who acclaimed Byron. Not only so, not only content to choose with unerring wrongness the indifferent of two names both with a claim to memory, Keats, as Shelley shrewdly pointed out at the time, was rejected when the poetical works of Dean Milman were loudly praised.

After so immediate an unhappy memory ringing in their ears, one would have thought that critics, however much they might have desired to laud Tennyson, would have been tender in disparaging Browning. After having dismissed as blasphemous and sensual a poet whom all now see as burning in the white light of purity—singular purity—and holy desire, one would have imagined that critics would not so quickly have rushed to say that Browning's phrasing was obscure and that he was difficult to read, faced by the fact that his phrasing is seldom, if ever, so obscure as Shakespeare's, whereas, apart from Sordello, he is no whit more difficult to read than is Milton. But the trouble sprang from a deep cause. As in the case of Blake and Wordsworth and Shelley, so again in the case of Browning, critics were not willing to accept, they either superciliously rejected or superficially neglected the poet's point of view, whereas it would seem a commonplace that it is not until a poet's point of view has been accepted that his burning vision can be seen. It is for this reason that a poet seldom sings to his own generation. He must, it appears, always wait till at least another layer beneath shall have formed itself. It is chastening to think that a poet, when he sings, sings to an audience that is framing the alphabet in its mind—is taking the first steps of progress toward his song and his vision.

With Browning, however, the interest is heightened by the peculiar nature of the problem he set. Steadily and

firmly he has brushed aside one and another till it is not too much to say that he has emerged, or is like to emerge, in the foremost rank of English poets, with such as Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley for companions; yet it must be admitted that, standing there, there is an oddness about his presence in that company. His own age we know regarded him less as a poet than as a consummate diner-out; it even attributed the partial success he won with the critics in *The Ring and the Book* to the operation of that social advantage. In Lockhart's phrase, he did not at all look "like a damned literary man," whereas Tennyson, with whom he naturally stood in contemporary comparison, looked his part even to the matter of raiment. Nor is it only a matter of personal appearance or habit of life. However much these things may have influenced his contemporaries, they can have little hold on those who have not seen him plain and have not stopped and talked to him; and yet the mind is so clothed with cant meanings of what poetry is that it will turn with distaste from the shallowness and smugness of *The Idylls of the King* and yet think of it as undeniably poetry even while it denies that name to *Men and Women*, which it may read and re-read and again re-read with increasing joy. Comparisons are undesirable; nevertheless, as the poets themselves appeared, so their poetry. Tennyson's poetry answers to the immediate and more obvious meanings of the word poetry even when it is least satisfactory, while Browning's poetry seems always to avoid them.

In his essay on Shelley's poetry Browning divided poets into two main divisions: objective and subjective, the fashioner or maker of beings independent of himself and the seer and diviner of new correspondences between the universe and its Deity. It is, as most distinctions are, more an aid to thinking than a glance into the inner shrine of vision, yet it is serviceable as providing a clew to Browning's own procedure. He himself set the seer above the fashioner; yet, in spite of his sympathy with Shelley's poetry and its marked effect on his early work, it was the fashioner's and not the seer's way of work that was his. The seer sings out of his own personality: what he sings is what he himself has seen. Browning seems ever to need some other personality whom he may fashion to sing for him. He seems never to be able to get at grips with Reality

till he is able to approach it in the guise of another's soul. In *Dramatic Lyrics* he sings:

"Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,  
And the sun looked over the mountain's rim:  
And straight was the path of gold for him,  
And the need of a world of men for me."

It was in very truth a need. To the seer, to such a seer as Wordsworth, for instance, Nature means much. Nature is the lap where he may stand to look into the burning face of God. Nature is flaming with signs and hints of the correspondence between things that link the universe into an irrefragable unity, so that a metaphor or simile becomes no mere literary exercise, but the startling discovery of some new at-one-ment between things and imagery, such imagery as trails through the "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," takes rank as authentic vision and not fanciful decoration. To Browning, too, doubtless Nature meant much. There are lines and passages in his poetry that recur to the memory, aspects of her seen and described in such a way as to make it evident that he saw her with far more than merely the painter's eye. Yet she had no direct vision to convey to him. Indeed, he seems almost uncomfortable in her presence, as though irked by the vision he knows here, feels there, but cannot quite see, and anxious to return to his refuge among the world of men to see with their eyes and grope with their hands. Or, as he sang in the roaring "Epilogue" to "Pacchiarotto," in which he smote, so soundly smote, and so lustily smote his inconsistent critics:

"Man's thoughts and loves and hates!

Earth is my vineyard, these grew there:

From grape of the ground, I made and marred

My vintage; easy the task or hard,

Who set it—this praise be my reward!

Earth's yield! Who yearns for the Dark Blue Seas,

Let them 'lay, pray, bray'—the addle-pates!

Mine be Man's thoughts, loves, hates!"

"Earth is my vineyard": so he sings. But earth was more than his vineyard; earth was also his refuge. When "the sun looked over the mountain's rim," then and chiefly then, as he looked down the "path of gold," the "need of a world of men" became most urgent. In the "Epilogue" to "Fifine at the Fair" he has a fancy that "he swam out far in the bay" and as he swam there in a manner of flight, heaven above and water beneath,

"Yes! there came floating by  
 Me, who lay floating too,  
 Such a strange butterfly!  
 Creature as dear as new."

The butterfly's is flight indeed in its natural element; his is only a mimicry of flight in an

"uncouth play  
 Of limbs that slip the fetter,  
 Pretend as they were not clay."

He fancies them both tasting of flight thus, flight through the heaven that is poetry, the poetry that is heaven, to the Reality of which one is the vision and the other the splendor. Yet—

"And, meantime, yonder streak  
 Meets the horizon's verge;  
 That is the land to seek  
 If we tire or dread the surge:

"Land the solid and safe—  
 To welcome again (confess!)  
 When, high and dry, we chafe  
 The body, and don the dress.

"Does she look, pity, wonder  
 At one who mimics flight,  
 Swims—heaven above, sea under,  
 Yet always earth in sight?"

But the "world of men" was even yet more than a refuge or a vineyard. "I have, you are to know," he once wrote to a correspondent, "such a love for flowers and leaves that I every now and then in an impatience at being unable to possess them thoroughly, to see them quite, satiate myself with their scent—bite them to bits." It is that very impatience that thwarts him in seeking to pluck the mystery of things for himself. Put a rose into his hand, and what does it mean? It makes him impatient; it, as it has been said, irks him. But put that rose into the hands of one of his world of men: into, say, the hands of John of Halberstadt: what then? Why, then:

"He with a 'look you!' vents a brace of rhymes,  
 And in there breaks the sudden rose itself,  
 Over us, under, round us every side,  
 Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs  
 And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all,  
 Buries us with a glory, young once more,  
 Pouring Heaven into his shut house of life."

It was as if, looking to see what the rose meant to John of Halberstadt, it came on him with a sudden uprush what the rose meant to him. Not only did the attempt to see Reality through the eyes of another give him an intentness and patience that otherwise he might have lacked, but, striking along the lines of his receptivity, it made the world of men his stepping-stone to Reality.

Thus he was no mere maker of men and women in the purely objective sense. He was not the creator of men in their "thoughts, loves, hates," content if he would present them living as Scott or Crabbe did. His creatures became eyes and ears to him wherewith to see and hear things more sharply and intensely than he himself could. They became as so many cloaks to him, clothed in whom he could enter at once through divers doors of the Temple of Truth. Through them all he could see the Much-more that would have escaped a single vision; and in them each he captured the intentness that annulled the irresolution consequent on confusion. For example: is it the coming of Christianity into the world? How shall a man such as he, a man with a strong bent for strange philosophical research, a man instinct with classic culture, and a man, moreover, whose whole soul rose insurgent for a revelation of Love in a world whose being and whose laws made Love a paradox otherwise inconceivable—how shall such a man state his attitude to that? His acceptance he did assert. But how little that expressed him? What worlds remained untold! What said the philosopher there? How spoke the artist whose business it was to make Beauty and who thereby took into his hands the cup of joy forever, stirring unquenchable thirsts in him? Not in his proper affirmation could he utter all that. But take the three poems that celebrate the dawn of Christianity into the world! Cleon as a Greek may reject the teaching of "a mere barbarian Jew," yet it is clear that the teaching of the mere barbarian Jew brings him just the cool cup that his art has set him athirst for. Karshish, the Arab physician, in "An Epistle," and John, in "A Death in the Desert," on one hand and the other show the impact of this new revelation on minds inclined to curious philosophical learning and full of quick personal aspiration.

Or is it the attitude of the artist to his art? We who have all Browning's work before us know that there was



in him the possibility of the artist who could turn away resolutely from vulgar success in the secrecy of his own soul to work the thing that pleased him, that there was also the artist who could happily take all good things, or seeming good things, as they came (the artist who wrote "How We Carried the Good News to Ghent"); and also the artist whose labor consistently was to express the thing just beyond his reach and who knew that to fail to reach forward would be to fall into sterility, perfect or imperfect. He was not one of these, but at one time all three. Each expressed no more than a facet of himself; and he could discover each facet in turn by looking at art through such different temperaments as those of "Pictor Ignotus," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea del Sarto" in the unique painting trilogy in *Men and Women*. Nor is it that he merely expressed himself in this way. In expressing himself so he discovered himself so.

In this he is, in the terms of his own distinction, not only a fashioner, but a seer also. He is a seer in the creatures he has fashioned. Indeed, he is only interested in his creatures at those angles of their lives that are full of crises—as though it were then, and then only, he could look through them to the realities beyond that he was interested in, they being opaque to him at all other whiles. It was that one vivid situation in Andrea del Sarto's life, that one crucial moment when his life spread itself before him like a drama, that Browning was interested in: and only in Andrea del Sarto for the sake of that moment. In the picture from which Browning drew his conception the situation is so vivid that with the poem before us it is not difficult to see him looking through it to the interest beyond. A variety of things may help create such a situation and such a moment: a chance meeting in "Dîs aliter Visum," an indiscreet discovery in "Fra Lippo Lippi," the fullness of achievement in "Abt Vogler"; but it is the situation that matters, for it is then that his characters become illumined with new meaning. It is only at such moments that the creatures can lend the creator eyes and ears to see and hear withal.

A "fashioner," or objective poet, is usually in the habit of seeking a dramatic guise for his workmanship; and it is not surprising to see that the majority of Browning's early works are all dramatic. Yet a dramatic poet is inter-

ested in his characters for their own sakes and not merely for what they may mean to him at one moment of their lives. He may be, and according to the greatness of his genius he will be, interested in the Destiny they may suggest; but this will be suggested in the tragic or comic dénouement they between them will achieve. In other words, however deeply he may see into them, he sees them from without: he is not so much concerned with any portion of them that is not employed in the dramatic field, but he is vitally concerned with every whit of them that is so employed. With Browning it is different. He is concerned from within outwards. In his dramas there are some portions of his characters employed in the dramatic field that interest him but little. They are of little consequence to him. On the other hand, there are whole phases of character that have no dramatic employment that concern him greatly, for they are of spiritual importance to himself. In other words, his interest is not with the character in his deed, but with the character before the deed, with the possibility ripe in him for an interesting diversity of deed. It is not the action that fascinates his mind, but the burning seed plot of action, for it is there the dreadful meanings of man's life shift and shape themselves like portents on a stormy sky. As his Luria says to Domizia:

"To the motive, the endeavor, the heart's self,  
Your quick sense looks: you crown and call aright  
The soul o' the purpose, ere 'tis shaped as act,  
Takes flesh i' the world, and clothes itself a king."

It is with this clue that the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* dissevers the tangled webs of the story before him, seeking to judge justly and fearlessly, saying:

"For I am ware it is the seed of act,  
God holds appraising in His hollow palm,  
Not act grown great thence on the world below,  
Leafage and branchage vulgar eyes admire."

In his first of dramas, in what indeed is his first notable poem, "Paracelsus," he is so much aware of the bent of his own mind that he declared his intention clearly. In the original preface he wrote:

"Instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and

have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded; and for this reason—I have endeavored to write a poem, not a drama.”

And it is clear he has written a poem, not a drama, although he has couched his poem in the dialogue framework inevitably associated with drama. A careful comparison will show that there is not so wide a difference between “Paracelsus” and “Sordello,” the poem he next engaged on, although one be called a dramatic poem and the other a narrative poem. The machinery of one is dialogue, even as the machinery of the other is narration, but the chief business of each poem is enacted in the monologues of each character. It is there we see unwind and unfold the raveled possibilities of action, of success or failure, and of all that is fateful in the eternal destinies of men. In these monologues we are taken behind the scenes. We leave the footlights without, where the character rings down the coin that he will elect to barter with, the deed that shall give his soul shape whatever be the consequence, and we see the soul with a variety of coinage, true coin and false counter, before him with a diversity of possible deeds into which he may be content to shape himself, but as yet unsold and unshaped. There is nothing unimportant there: there is no shadow of a possibility there that ranks not equal with all other possibilities. Or as Pippa sang:

“Say not ‘a small event!’ Why ‘small’?  
Costs it more pain that this, ye call  
A ‘great event,’ should come to pass  
Than that? Untwine me from the mass  
Of deeds which make up life, one deed  
Power may fall short in or succeed!”

A curiosity of mood such as this is essentially dramatic and yet its very nature is to preclude it from achievement of drama. Being concerned with souls before the decision of action, it is obviously concerned with men and women before the moment when their general destinies cross and sway one another; and it is this moment that makes drama. It might be said that drama is the result of a number of anterior dramatic decisions. The dramatist assumes such decisions as the basis of his workmanship: Browning is concerned with the achievement of such decisions. Had

Browning had the telling of the tragedy of Othello, we should have had a monologue from Iago giving us the story from his point of view in order that thereby we might be enabled to see the resolution of decision taking shape in his mind; another from Othello and another from Desdemona, who would have both survived long enough to that end; and it would have left to Cassio to give us the tragic loading of the bed. Each decision would have been dramatic, but it is the sum total of the decisions that would have made drama.

It is in this sense that Browning is dramatic, and therefore it is that "Pippa Passes" is so characteristic a piece of work of his. In each of the four chosen situations, situations that Pippa conceives as full of happiness, a fateful decision is pending in the balance. In each case the characters of the situation have their hands irresolutely wandering over a bed of flowers, not knowing which bloom to pluck and wear for shame or glory on his soul. It is this situation that fascinates Browning's interest, because it is this situation that reveals to him with vivid and startling illumination the value of the realities beyond that would else have eluded him; and hence the final influence that sends the hand swiftly down to the blossom of its choice becomes momentous and tragic. It is no matter how slight it may otherwise seem to be, its value becomes of the highest. Pippa's wandering songs on her one annual holiday are no great matter, it would seem; no more than an idle jest turned against a comrade over wine. But one, as the other, may make or mar a soul for all time.

It is so more or less in all his plays. In his historical plays there may of necessity be less of this; in his later plays it may so overburden the dialogue as to threaten its final disruption in the monologues of *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ*. But all the while we feel that he is waiting till his characters achieve that particular angle when they shall scintillate with their hidden and inner illumination. It is this vivid moment he celebrates in his puzzling lyric "My Star":

"All that I know  
Of a certain star  
Is, it can throw  
(Like the angled spar)  
Now a dart of red,

Now a dart of blue;  
Till my friends have said  
They would fain see, too,  
My star that dartles the red and the blue!  
Then it stops like a bird; like a flower hangs furled:  
They must solace themselves with the Saturn above it.  
What matter to me if their star is a world?  
Mine has opened its soul to me; therefore I love it."

In one instance, indeed, destructive of all dramatic intention, this "dartling" even continues beyond the limits of the play. In his last play, "In a Balcony," perhaps notably his last play, at its moment of conclusion the Queen does not seem even yet to have taken her final decision. It is in her that the play pivots; and when her tragic moment comes she sees life snatched from her very hand and "goes out." What her decision with regard to the lovers is we are not told. Constance hears the "measured heavy tread" of the guard, and the hint is that they are coming to take the lovers to their doom. But we know that much later in life Browning himself earnestly discussed the possibility that the guard is not heard coming to take away the lovers, but to bear away the dead body of the Queen, she slain by her own hand. The Queen's resolve is never taken. The cloudy portents are still to be seen shifting and shaping on the sky.

Thus it is not surprising to see, in course of time, the unnecessary and cumbersome business of dialogue or narration drop away to leave the self-revealing monologue standing in its naked strength. In the third volume of "Bells and Pomegranates," entitled *Dramatic Lyrics*, Browning had already been looking at life through the vision of men and women, creatures of his. Only there, though the lyrics were dramatic in the sense that they expressed the mood and emotions of creatures of Browning, and not of Browning, they were not dramatic in the sense that some vital shaping of character was implicit in them. In a sense, all lyrics are dramatic; and the critic who affixes to the lyric the sense of subjective emotion is only arbitrarily insisting on calling a passing moment eternity. Every true work of art was lived, and lived intensely, as it was wrought. Thereafter it took a detached and separate existence. Shakespeare lived Othello when he made him, even as Wordsworth lived "Tintern Abbey" when he made it. Then they were

subjective; once finished, they became objective, for the soul of man lives on and passes on and changes. It is only a question of phraseology. There is no lyric surely that expresses all of a man or even all of him at that one moment of utterance. A lyric can only express a phase of him; and if he choose to place that phase in circumstances other than his own in order to see it the better, it does not at all mean that that phase is not his own.

Yet it was necessary, if dialogue and narrative were to drop away, that the explanations they offered as to the situation implicit in the dramatic resolve or aspiration should be contained in the monologue; and the suspense of lyric emotion, however long the poem might be in which it is caught and crystallized, is too acute to permit of such an explanation. When "Kentish Sir Byng stood for his King, bidding the crop-headed Parliament swing," it was but a great, gay, rollicking hatred of crop-heads and a breezy love of bright attire and wine-cups, as all good Parliamentarians must feel sometimes at the heart of them or remain but lean-souled men for the lack of it. There was no better ship-money man than Browning, and yet he lived every moment of that lyric. But though it was no more than that, it lent itself very easily to development. It needed but little development to express by implication all the various sides of a dramatic situation if its author were only happy in his choice of the one promontory peak from which the whole country could be viewed with one slow turn of the eye. And it was not likely that the man who sang

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp.  
Or what's a heaven for?"—

the man who sang boldly

"Stake your counter as boldly every whit,  
Venture as warily, use the same skill,  
Do your best, whether winning or losing it,

"If you chose to play!—is my principle.  
Let a man contend to the uttermost  
For his life's set prize, be it what it will!

. . . . .  
. . . . .

"And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost

Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,  
Though the end in sight were a vice, I say ”—

the man who held that the only soul to be held in contempt was he who did not strive loftily and ambitiously, with failure and success as irrelevancies apart—such a man was little likely to choose a wrong promontory peak. For his attention was on that which is the secret of all earth's interest.

So there came about that great sequence of monologues in *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ*. It seems inconceivable that the two volumes in which *Men and Women* made their appearance should have met with so slight an attention. One would have conceived that critics, seeing a writer with such a diversity of riches in his fee, would, if only from curiosity, have endeavored to assume Browning's point of view in order to discover what his vision was. Instead of which they vamped inconsequentialities as to the difficulties of understanding him, whereas the only difficulty was that of discovering and assuming his point of view, of searching to see exactly what the monologue meant to him, and why he expressed himself through the lips of fifty others in this way. To deny that Browning has his vices of style would be foolish. Relative pronouns are readily dropped, small words are clipped and chipped mercilessly at times, words are taken across his knee and their quantity broken in order to fit them into some position in a line that they have rebelled at, strange words are used not because of their beauty, but because of his erudition. But these make him aggravating to read, not difficult to understand. Once the point of view of a poem is seen, its difficulties are gone. Even the aggravations often take a new meaning, for it would be clearly foolish to expect the same stately beauty of line from Fra Lippo Lippi as we are to receive from Cleon.

Whether such a development was or was not conscious and deliberate matters little, the result was amazing enough for all the critic's neglect. Probably with a man of Browning's faculty of mind, probing, searching, introspective, it was conscious. If it were so it would explain the shout of joy with which he came upon *The Old Yellow Book* and the story that lay hidden in it in a perplexed series of legal pleadings and cross-pleading:

“Small-quarto size, part print, part manuscript:  
A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact  
Secreted from man’s life when hearts beat hard,  
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since.”

It also explains the story of his at once, on reading the “square old yellow book,” taking twelve pebbles from the road and arranging them at equal distances on the parapet bordering it in representation of the twelve books of the poem; and the fact that he penned in the book in Greek the line, “But for me the muse in her strength prepares her mightiest arrow.” His art was awaiting such a consummation. His use of the monologue, as it had developed in his hand, only needed some such occasion. His previous book had been called *Dramatis Personæ*; but then the *dramatis personæ* were each of them concerned with his or her own separate drama. Their several monologues did not center round a common story. But the conception of nine *dramatis personæ* (or, rather, six *dramatis personæ* and three on-lookers), each of them in a lengthy monologue telling a single story from his or her own promontory peak, each seeing the circumambient countryside differently, each occupied with the history of a soul through the various crises that take the seed of act and develop it into leafage and branchage, giving it shape thereby for all time—such was a conception that might well thrill any artist; but coming, as it did, at a particular moment in the development of Browning’s art, how much more it meant to him cannot easily be said.

And how wonderful the result is! Its gifts are so various that it is difficult not to be tempted into language that loses sight of its origin and cause. Apart altogether from portraiture, for example, let one read in due order the tale told by the three chief participants—Count Guido Franceschini, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, and Pompilia. Each tale passes over the same incidents of the story; and each carries sympathy and conviction, a sympathy and conviction so complete that it is not easy to remember that there is another tale to be told. In itself this is no inconsiderable feat. It is itself sufficient to show that the monologue was to Browning, in itself and in its implications, the discovery that should vindicate his art. But there is the portraiture also; and here, it is necessary to say, Browning has not alone added to, but enriched the creations of the world’s literature. The



portraits of *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ* were but sketches beside the human knowledge that went to the creation of such men as Count Guido and Giuseppe Caponsacchi. They touch all sides of human life. They nod at all points of the compass. The husband, pleading for his life on the indictment of murdering his wife, who, when charged with cruelty toward her, does not deny it, but boldly embarks on the attempt to subdue the charge by frank casuistry, and succeeds; and it is not merely arguing, but expressing himself, is not a less masterly achievement than the "young frank personable priest" who, while serving his church daintily in ladies' service, "a fribble and a coxcomb," yet preserves a pure manliness that at a glance from a lovely souled woman in distress can stand erect in its challenging strength, never doubting the loveliness of her soul in spite of seeming letters to the contrary, finally throwing aside all chance of worldly success for the privilege of merely serving and saving her, in it all to declare, proudly, that purely he loves her.

These two portraits in themselves were a distinction to any artist. But what of Pompilia? There is no doubt that she meant more to Browning than we imagine. There is an aloofness about her loveliness, a simple frankness withal, that suggests it. It would have been enough in most women to have been, on the one hand, the touchstone to Caponsacchi's true greatness, and, on the other, to have awakened from the old Pope so very beautiful and humble a tribute. But her loveliness and purity are not only a rumor. That were an easy thing, perhaps, for a poet to have achieved. But she has to maintain them and make them real in a monologue of nearly two thousand lines; and she succeeds. Join to these Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelus, counsel for Guido:

"The jolly learned man of middle age,  
Cheek and jowl all in laps with fat and law,

Ovidian quip and Ciceronian crank,  
A bubble in the larynx while he laughs,  
As he had fritters deep down frying there,"

Juris Dr. Johannes-Baptista Bottinus the Fisc, who, in his zeal for having something to prove, assumes Pompilia's guilt in order to minimize the importance of it, and the old

Pope, seeking to judge justly in the light of heaven that is almost falling at his feet, and a gallery of portraits faces us that it is not easy to do justice to, save than to say that the poem they help to make is one of the very great things of our literature.

In his later work, Browning went on to put the monologue to newer uses yet. Instead of merely declaring and defining the implicit drama, instead only of depicting the raveled possibilities of action to which the crucial moment of decision came, the character chosen undertook, moreover, to defend in a wonder of casuistry, that puzzles the wit the action it had decided upon. More than a hint of this was heard in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" and "Sludge the Medium," but it was left to "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society" and "Fifine at the Fair" to carry out the process in fullness of detail. Here, too, not less than in the simple use of the monologue, it is not difficult to see Browning using his characters as agents in order to see things that he might have a difficulty in focusing in his own person. In the two later poems quoted their very difficulty is just this. Time and time again the casuistry breaks and Browning through the eyes of his character is seen looking on reality beyond. Then the clouds roll on again; and it is not easy to say how far or how thoroughly we may trust the vision he seems to have seen.

It is singular and yet but fitting that when he had to see his vision with his own eyes and declare what he found to say in his own proper person he lost rather than gained in distinctness. Toward the end of his days a great private loss helped him to make one of his loveliest, if not the loveliest, of the later poems in *La Saisaiz*. In his earlier days in *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* he made a poem where he told his own story, a poem that his own generation understood where it found in the rest of his work only mystification. The shock of grief and the seeking for wisdom in grief give a quiet sunset beauty to *La Saisaiz* that is searching, whereas the earlier poem jolts and jars against this and that would-be exponent of Christianity; but in neither one nor the other do we seem to hear the authentic tones of Browning as we hear them when he gazes through this artist when he struggles to express beauty, or that musician whose music kindles in him a passion for the moment when his broken aspiring harmonies shall be completed, uplifted, and

made eternal. In his last supreme words he declared himself as

“One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,  
Held we fell to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake.”

It is this man we may hear best in the creatures of his making, the world of men who helped him to his vision, who expressed him as he expressed them; and if to help us to stand equipped in manliness and womanliness, loving Beauty and serving Truth, ripe in understanding, be any measure of greatness, then even apart from all personal achievement we must echo Landor and say, “Browning, a great poet, a very great poet indeed.”

DARRELL FIGGIS.